

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 7, 2017

Agenda Item: DeCock Ranch Conservation Easement (R7)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

Background

FWP proposes to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on 9,783 contiguous acres of deeded land on the DeCock Ranch near Hysham. In addition to 8,783 acres of native grass and sagebrush grasslands, the ranch includes approximately 1,000 acres of riparian bottomland along 7 miles of the Yellowstone River. The upland portion of the ranch includes critical habitat for antelope, mule deer and sage-grouse (within a Core Sage-grouse Area). The Yellowstone River portion of this ranch includes important riparian habitat for ring-necked pheasants, wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, Canada geese, and other waterfowl species.

The DeCock Ranch is adjacent to the FWP Isaac Homestead Wildlife Management Area (WMA), publicly accessible DNRC land, and private land enrolled in Block Management. Together, these properties make up over 250,000 contiguous acres of publicly accessible land. An additional 5,300 acres of private land enrolled in Block Management exists across the Yellowstone River from the DeCock Ranch. This project would add to existing conservation efforts in the area including Isaac Homestead WMA, Amelia Island WMA and approximately 50,000 acres of sagebrush grassland conserved through 30-year lease agreements with private landowners. A conservation easement would protect healthy blocks of riparian and sagebrush habitats, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting and fishing opportunities.

FWP is collaborating with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to potentially partner on funding for this proposed conservation easement.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP has not sought any public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would conduct appropriate analysis, public review processes, and negotiations.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: Purchase the 9,783 acre DeCock Ranch Conservation Easement. FWP would develop a grazing system and riparian management systems to improve wildlife habitat while also securing permanent public access.

No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

To conserve the high resource values and public recreation opportunities on this land, FWP recommends endorsement by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, allowing FWP to proceed with the further development of this opportunity.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission endorse this conservation easement project, allowing FWP to continue negotiations and to conduct analysis and associated public review.